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The ancient quarrel and the dream of writing

Richard Smith

Abstract:

The main purpose of this chapter is to question and finally reject the tendency to see philosophy and literature (especially poetry) as essentially distinct forms of language, a tendency which sometimes extends to regarding them as mutually exclusive and to be understood as in some way in opposition to each other. The idea of that opposition is generally supposed to go back as far as Plato, at least, and much of what I write here will concern just how we are to read what we find on the matter in Plato's *Republic*, how we are to read Plato's dialogues in general and, even more broadly, how we are to read what comes to us under the title of philosophy. It is Plato, I suggest, who supplies us with a powerful way of understanding the instability of the literature/philosophy binary, and who, at the end of *Republic*, invites us to witness its collapse.

‘Still now, and more desperately than ever, I dream of a writing that would be neither philosophy nor literature, nor even contaminated by one or the other, while still keeping – I have no desire to abandon this – the memory of literature and philosophy’.

Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 1991, p. 73

I Expelling the poets

As everyone knows (the phrase should immediately put us on our guard), Plato expelled the poets from the ideal city-state which, as everyone also knows, it is the business of *Republic* to sketch. This apparent hostility takes up much of Books 2 and 3 is later summarised roughly half way through Book 10 (606e-607c):

Therefore, Glaucon, I said, whenever you meet with any of the eulogists of Homer declaring that he has been the educator of Hellas, and that he is profitable for education and for the ordering of human things, and that you should take him up again

and again and get to know him and regulate your whole life according to him, we may love and honour those who say these things – they are excellent people, as far as their lights extend; and we are ready to acknowledge that Homer is the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers; but we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State. For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State.

That is most true, he said.

And now since we have reverted to the subject of poetry, let this our defence serve to show the reasonableness of our former judgment in sending away out of our State an art having the tendencies which we have described; for reason constrained us. But that she may impute to us any harshness or want of politeness, let us tell her that there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry; of which there are many proofs, such as the saying of ‘the yelping hound howling at her lord’, or of one ‘mighty in the vain talk of fools’, and ‘the mob of sages circumventing Zeus’, and the ‘subtle thinkers who are beggars after all’;¹ and there are innumerable other signs of ancient enmity between them.²

There is no shortage of those who have taken this at face value. To take just three examples – all reputable philosophers – Karl Popper (1945 p. 228 n. 39) has no doubt that we see here an aspect of Plato’s totalitarianism and his opposition to any kind of ‘open society’. Popper also marvels, as one might, at the way in which ‘educationists’ are so enthusiastic about Plato’s educational theories (ibid.). Iris Murdoch’s *The Fire and the Sun* (1977) is subtitled *Why Plato Banished the Artists*; she saw no reason to modify the literal reading in her later *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). Among other comments on the subject there she writes that ‘Plato’s attack on art must be seen in the context of his whole moral philosophy’ (p. 14). Simon Blackburn (2006) writes without qualm about ‘Plato’s attacks on poetry and painting’ (p. 149) and his calls for the poets to be banned (p. 17).

Since I am going to challenge this literal reading it is necessary to examine the text of *Republic* at some length. At an early point, in Book 2, Plato represents Socrates as securing his interlocutors’ assent to the general principle that all literature – poetry is particularly specified – should be morally improving. Accordingly citizens of the ideal city-state should

not be exposed to stories about the brutal behaviour of the gods or their battles with each other (377-8), or about Zeus deceiving Agamemnon with a false dream, found in the well-known myths (377-8). Similarly any suggestion that the afterlife is a less than rewarding place for dead heroes to spend eternity in must be censored in case it weakens the resolve of soldiers in battle. Among the first passages of poetry marked out for excision is from Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus has travelled to the underworld in order to consult the prophet Teiresias about the best way of securing a safe return to his home island of Ithaca. In the Underworld he meets the ghosts of Greek warriors alongside whom he fought at Troy. He greets Achilles with the warmth and respect due to one who, he declares, was honoured like a god in life and is now a prince among the dead. Achilles' bitter reply is quoted at *Republic* 386c directly from the *Odyssey* (XI 488–491):

I would prefer to be a workman,
hired by a poor man on a peasant farm
than rule as king of all the dead.³

There follow several more pages of *Republic* where Socrates is represented as recommending the excision of lines in which Homer depicts Greek heroes and gods lamenting. By contrast lines depicting how 'the Greek army moved forward, 'breathing valour, in silent obedience to their officers' / stubbornly each in his heart to stand by the others'⁴ (*Iliad* III.8-9, quoted in *Republic* Book 3, 389e) convey the right moral message and can be approved for educational purposes. I return below to Odysseus and Achilles's reply to him.

When the discussion of poetry and the arts is resumed in Book 10 there is renewed criticism of their appeal to the lower, irrational elements of the soul. Drama in particular moves us, often to tears, and makes it harder for us to recover our capacity for reasoned deliberation (604c). The dramatic poet finds it a problem to represent 'the wise and calm temperament', preferring 'the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated' (604e-605a). There is a further line of criticism of poetry and the arts in Book 10. The craftsman makes a bed, or a plough or a chair. In doing this he is imitating the 'idea' of a chair, or 'chairness', that which all chairs have in common and which he holds intuitively in his mind's eye. These 'ideas' are the Platonic Forms, which we are reminded of in Book VI in the context of the allegory of the Cave. Humankind lives in darkness, comforted by a fire that throws shadows onto a wall. Imprisoned and shackled, we cannot turn round and see that the shadows are merely the

reflections of things and not things themselves. Accordingly we take the imitation of reality for reality itself. From time to time a prisoner escapes and realises his error. Then, if he manages to struggle out of the cave, his passage from the world of mere appearances to the world of intelligible reality offers him a glimpse of the highest Form or idea of all, ‘the Form of the good’, here emblematised by the sun, the ‘the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual [world]; ... this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed’ (517c).

The poet or artist can now be seen as a kind of counterfeiter, working at several removes from the light of reason. The craftsman does at least make a chair, having some sense of the idea or Form of ‘chairness’, even if he has had little sight of ‘the source of reason and truth in the intellectual world’. The poet or artist merely imitates the craftsman, offering nothing more than a representation of a chair:⁵

Then must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colours and figures.
(*Republic* Book 10, 600e-601a)

All of this is of course familiar to any student of philosophy, and the literal reading of Plato’s ‘expulsion of the poets’ is no doubt made more persuasive by the intimidating presence of the Theory of Ideas or Forms, because (as everyone knows) that Theory stands at the heart of Plato’s philosophy. I shall leave this to one side for the moment, noting here only that it is no longer widely accepted that Plato has a theory (or Theory, that is, a systematic doctrine) of Forms – or Ideas – at all: he does not present us with any systematic doctrines, for his dialogues are not treatises. Of the Forms specifically, Kenneth Sayre for example writes that although there are discussions in Plato’s dialogues of ‘various aspects of the Forms from which a theory of some sort might be pieced together’ there simply is no ‘explicitly stated “theory of forms” defended by Plato within the dialogues’ – and, as he says, this is unlikely to be a result of ‘inadvertence’ on Plato’s part (Sayre 1995, p. 7).

II The framing of the dialogues

It is because Plato has not written *Republic* or any other of his dialogues as a treatise that we cannot say he ‘expelled the poets’. As is customary in his dialogues he puts on stage for us, so to speak, various characters, usually including Socrates, and we cannot assume that any particular argument or opinion voiced by the characters reflects Plato’s own view, any more than we can suppose one of Shakespeare’s characters speaks for him. For example, in *Hamlet* (I. iii. 78–82) Polonius offers his son the following advice:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

We cannot take this at face value, firstly because it is nonsense. If you were by nature a devious and dishonest individual then by being ‘true to yourself’ you could make a good job of being false to everyone around you. Secondly, it is sententious. The earnest monosyllables and the cliché ‘it must follow as the night the day’ should alert us to this, as should the character of Polonius in the play: he is a rather foolish, conceited old man, much given to uttering words of faux-wisdom. If we cannot conclude that Polonius’s words reflect Shakespeare’s own views, why should we suppose that Plato has put his own views into the mouth of Socrates in *Republic*, thus offering the reader truths that can simply be learned by taking the text at face value?

The point can be illustrated by the openings of many of the dialogues. They are complex and multi-layered. A careful reading of these openings presents a major obstacle to any assumption that the dialogues express Plato’s own ideas or doctrines. The opening of the *Symposium* supplies an excellent example of this layeredness and it may help to make what I say later about *Republic* less strange. Apollodorus tells an unnamed companion that he has a ready answer to his request (which by implication was made before the opening of the dialogue) for an account of the speeches made in praise of love by Socrates, Alcibiades and others at a famous feast hosted by Agathon.⁶ Apollodorus says he has the whole story fresh in his memory because only yesterday he replied to the same request from Glaucon, who had already heard about it from someone whose source was Phoenix, son of Philip, whose informant in turn was Aristodemus (172b). But the account that came to Glaucon in this way was unclear. Glaucon had been under the impression that this feast was a recent event, but Apollodorus told him – as he explains to the unnamed companion – that it took place a long time ago, when the participants were young men. It was not Socrates who reported these

speeches to Apollodorus, as we might expect – would he not have the keenest ear for their philosophical nuances? – but Aristodemus, another participant at the feast, who had been the original source of the account that Glaucon found unclear. Apollodorus says, ‘I asked Socrates about the truth of some parts of his narrative, and he confirmed them’ (173b). Thus he was able to tell the whole story to Glaucon as they walked to Athens. Now he will relate it to the unnamed companion, endeavouring to give him the exact words of Aristodemus.⁷

It is important to note that there are at least three ways in which the supposed sources, Apollodorus and Aristodemus, are less than reliable. First, a long time has elapsed between Apollodorus’s narration to the unnamed companion and the feast itself. The feast can be securely dated to 416 bce by the reference to the success of Agathon, its host, in writing a prize-winning tragedy (Hamilton 1967, p. 9). Since Apollodorus has been fascinated by Socrates for the last three years, and Socrates, who died in 399 bce, is still alive, it seems that Aristodemus remembered the narrative in great detail for around 13 years before passing it on to Apollodorus. His memory must be prodigious. Yet, secondly, later in the dialogue Apollodorus admits that ‘Aristodemus did not recollect all that was said [i.e. at the feast], nor do I recollect all that he related to me’ (178a). Although Apollodorus sought some confirmation from Socrates, it was only about ‘some parts’ of his narrative, and there is no suggestion that Socrates filled in any of Aristodemus’s gaps. We should not miss the irony: in his dissatisfaction with Aristodemus’s testimony, passed on to him via Phoenix, the unnamed companion has turned for a better account to Apollodorus, whose source was also Aristodemus. Thirdly, although Apollodorus has checked Aristodemus’s account with Socrates, he introduces a further acknowledgement of his own unreliability: he has the reputation of a madman: ‘I am mad (*mainomai*) and get things wrong’ (*parapaiō*: literally ‘strike beside’, ‘hit the wrong note’, 173e). Jowett translates this as ‘out of my wits’. Apollodorus, like Aristodemus, is a devotee of Socrates (Aristodemus even imitates Socrates’s practice of going around barefoot.) Fanatical loyalty has clouded Apollodorus’s judgement and by implication Aristodemus’s judgement too: this is why he gets things wrong.

What are we to make of this intricate and virtually self-annulling introduction to the dialogue? The various editors make little of it. Hamilton (1967, p. 10) acknowledges the ‘curiously elaborate machinery’ at work here, but writes in the same paragraph that Plato’s motive ‘seems to be to heighten the plausibility of his historical fiction by appealing to the authority of apparently unimpeachable witnesses’, that is Apollodorus and Aristodemus, their

authority in Hamilton's view deriving from the fact that they are historical persons. Bury (1909 p. xvi) thinks that the way in which Aristodemus and Apollodorus are described 'is evidently intended to produce the impression that we have reliable witnesses'. Jowett, in his Introduction to the dialogue, writes ironically that 'The speeches are attested to us by the very best authority' (1871 p. 481).

The madman Apollodorus ... has heard them from another 'madman' [i.e. Aristodemus, like Apollodorus a fanatical supporter of Socrates] who was the shadow of Socrates in days of old, like him going about barefooted, and who had been present at the time. Would you desire better witness? (ibid.)

Their account of the feast, Jowett notes, shows they are familiar with Socrates to the point of mentioning, for instance, his 'absences' or fits, and his ability to drink without becoming drunk. We might say that their discipleship goes little further than rehearsing the familiar gossip about the life and habits of the man.⁸

While this framing of the *Symposium* has frequently been ignored or misread, there is another level of framing of the dialogue. All the speakers at the feast have the name of real Athenians. The dating of the event to 416 bce places it just before two scandals and a disaster. One scandal is known as the 'mutilation of the hermae'. These were statues bearing the head and genitals of the god Hermes. They were situated at roadsides, crossroads and other prominent places throughout the city. It seems that groups of Athenian youths, emerging perhaps from drinking parties less rarefied than the one described in Plato's dialogue, ran riot and defaced many of the statues. Hermes was the god of good luck and wealth and of safe passage for travellers, which explains where the hermae were located. The perpetrators of this scandal were never identified, but those of a second scandal were. This was the involvement of prominent Athenians in rituals of the Eleusinian mysteries, often at secret meetings disguised as drinking parties. Since the mysteries contravened the religions sanctioned at Athens celebration of them constituted the crime of sacrilege. This was a capital offence; it was one of the charges on which Socrates was convicted and executed in 399 bce. Among those investigated for the earlier offences were Eryximachus, Phaedrus and Alcibiades, who are all given major parts in Plato's dialogue. Eryximachus was either exiled or executed (it is not clear); Phaedrus fled into exile. Alcibiades was implicated in this scandal and the disaster that followed it.

In 415 bce the Athenians mounted an expedition against Syracuse, in Sicily. It was intended to break the stalemate in their long-running war with Sparta, in particular by giving them complete naval supremacy. Alcibiades spoke in support of the expedition in the Athenian Assembly, and he sought and gained appointment as one of the leaders of the expedition. The scandal of the mutilation of the hermae shortly before the expedition sailed made it seem ill-omened; Alcibiades's implication in the scandal of the Eleusinian mysteries led to his recall from his leadership of the expedition. He escaped into exile, shortly afterwards defecting first to Sparta and then to Persia. He was eventually forgiven and summoned back to the Athenian side three times, once to command the Greek fleet at Samos. He died in 404 bce, probably in Phrygia: it is generally believed that he was assassinated on orders from Persia.

The Sicilian expedition was a disaster. The Athenians lost around 40,000 men and 200 ships and the balance of military power swung conclusively to Sparta. The historian Thucydides gives a harrowing account of the defeat and of the sufferings of Athenian prisoners of war in the stone quarries of Syracuse. He describes it as 'the most calamitous of defeats; for they were utterly and entirely defeated; their sufferings were on an enormous scale; their losses were, as they say, total; army, navy, everything was destroyed, and, out of many, only few returned' (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, end of Book 7).

How are we to read the *Symposium* in the light of this framing? Jowett makes no mention of it at all in his 17-page Introduction. Hamilton comments on it in a single sentence (pp. 10-11), mentioning Alcibiades's part in the Sicilian Expedition 'which began the long death-agony of the Athenian Empire and involved him in dishonour and ruin; but no hint of this is allowed to intrude' (ie in the dialogue). Waterfield (p. xx) quotes from Martha Nussbaum (1986 p. 166), who finds plenty of hints, adding just a single sentence of his own to the effect that the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries by Alcibiades was 'rumoured at the time to have occurred during a symposium'. There is a strong sense in these commentaries of something being suppressed: as if it stood in the way of a conventionally philosophical (that is, in modern terms) reading of the speeches at Agathon's symposium. As if it threatened to spoil the party.

We might be more sensitive to these framings now that literary theory has directed our attention to the parts of a text that were once seemed marginal, if they were noticed at all; to wonder, even, if the margins or frames are sometimes more significant than what had previously been accepted as 'the text itself' (Derrida 1982, 1987). At any rate the first

framing – the opening of the dialogue – makes it clear that we are not to expect an accurate account of the famous feast to which we could bring a literal reading of the text. Then the second, historical framing seems to offer a key, except that it is not clear how we are to interpret it. Perhaps the speeches at the feast depict the care-free artistic and philosophical sophistication that give life meaning even as the skies darken. Or perhaps they emblemise irresponsibility: Athens is on the brink of disaster, and some of its most prominent intellectuals, several of whom will be exiled or executed as a consequence of that disaster, can find no better way to spend an evening drinking and playing a parlour-game of making largely conventional speeches in praise of *erōs*.⁹ Or perhaps there is a darker irony here. *Erōs*, which we so easily and misleadingly translate as ‘love’, contains passion and desire. Yet the speakers do not acknowledge, still less address, the vicious forms that these took in contemporary Athens. Its citizens were proverbial for high-handed selfishness (*pleonexia*) particularly expressed in imperial expansionism, defying the deeply rooted Greek belief that *hubris* (arrogance) leads to a sharp reversal of one’s fortunes, followed by *nemesis* or downfall.

III The opening of *Republic*

The opening of *Republic* can be helpfully compared and contrasted with that of *Symposium*. At first sight it seems much more straightforward. Socrates appears to speak directly to the reader: ‘I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston’ (327a). But of course this is a dialogue, or a kind of play, written by Plato. This presents Socrates as the narrator of the dialogue or play; this contains characters such as Glaucon, Thrasymachus and of course Socrates – or as we should perhaps call him, distinguishing the character from the narrator, ‘Socrates’. Plato writes that according to Socrates, he and the others once conducted the following dialogue. Thus the opening immediately structures the text as having three layers. What seemed to be direct is in fact complex; the text has some of the quality of a piece of theatre that insists on its own theatricality.

The players, as we might call them, went down to see a new religious festival and to offer up prayers to its goddess. The idea of going down or descent (*katabasis*) recurs constantly in *Republic*; it carries echoes of Odysseus’s descent to the Underworld in *Odyssey* XI. It is of course Homer’s description of the Underworld as a place of ghosts and shadows that Plato represents Socrates as being most critical of in the discussion of poetry in *Republic* 3 (386a-

387b). Odysseus's descent is often said to be emblematic of the philosopher's escape from the Cave and his vision of the light of the Good, and who instead of enjoying this as a private, cerebral pleasure chooses instead to go back down into the Cave and enlighten his former companions. These descents are echoed in the myth of Er, at the very end of *Republic*, who came back to life when he had been given up for dead and told of his journey to the Underworld and what he saw there. I return to this myth below.

On leaving the Piraeus and the festival Socrates and his companion, Glaucon, turned back towards Athens, but they were intercepted:

Polemarchus the son of Cephalus chanced to catch sight of us from a distance as we were starting on our way home, and told his servant to run and bid us wait for him. The servant took hold of me by the cloak behind, and said: Polemarchus desires you to wait. (327b)

Jowett's translation seems to miss the undercurrent of violence here. First Socrates is seized by his coat, and by a servant: something hardly to be endured by a free citizen of Athens. Then the Greek text reads *perimeinai he keleusai* – and the verb *keleusai* that Jowett translates with 'bid' and 'desires' occurs three times. It is in fact the standard Greek word for telling someone to do something. Lee's 1968 translation is 'Polemarchus says you are to wait': Polemarchus is peremptorily commanding, not proposing or any of the other standard synonyms of 'bidding', nor is he merely 'desiring'. When Socrates confirms that he and Glaucon are indeed on their way back to Athens the threat of violence is repeated: Polemarchus asks him if he has noticed the gang of friends that are with him. Jowett's translation continues (Polemarchus speaks first):

- And are you stronger than all these? for if not, you will have to remain where you are.
- May there not be the alternative, I said, that we may persuade you to let us go?
- But can you persuade us, if we refuse to listen to you? he said.
- Certainly not, replied Glaucon.
- Then we are not going to listen; of that you may be assured.

Socrates is taken against his will to the house of Polemarchus and his father, Cephalus. There was a real Cephalus living in the Piraeus at the time of the dramatic date of *Republic*: he was a wealthy arms dealer, whose factory of 120 slaves produced battle shields for the Athenian

hoplites in the war against Sparta (Nails 2001). This seems to confirm the aura of violence that surrounds the opening of the dialogue. Cephalus (his name means ‘head’) has expressed a desire for some entertaining conversation. What the Boss wants, the Boss gets. Polemarchus and his boys have made sure of that. If *Republic* is a dialogue that takes place under compulsion and the threat of violence, how can it exemplify philosophy as the play of free ideas in genuine dialectic? For while Cephalus withdraws at an early stage the whole dialogue takes place in his house in which Socrates and Glaucon are suffering what we would now call false imprisonment. We should note too that while Socrates and Glaucon ‘went down’ to the festival in the Piraeus and people enjoying the sights and sounds of the ordinary world like the prisoners in the cave, it was when they tried to go back up to Athens, to the customary place of Socrates’ philosophising, rather like the prisoner coming out of the Cave, that they are stopped. If the philosophising of *Republic* takes place in a Cave of sorts, we might wonder what this does for the quality of the arguments. As for Polemarchus (whose name means ‘battle leader’ or ‘first for a fight’ battle¹⁰), he is little mentioned after the first Book of *Republic* but he does make one significant intervention, at the beginning of Book 5 (at the very centre of the text) in a second example of coat-pulling:

Polemarchus, who was sitting a little way off, just beyond Adeimantus, began to whisper to him: stretching forth his hand, he took hold of the upper part of his coat by the shoulder, and drew him towards him, leaning forward himself so as to be quite close and saying something in his ear, of which I only caught the words, ‘Shall we let him [Socrates] off, or what shall we do?’

Polemarchus wants to hear about the status of women and children in this ideal city-state, and the force of his desire leads him to treat Adeimantus roughly, and to refer to Socrates in a threatening way.

It has sometimes been noted that the characters and setting of *Republic* ‘give the dialogue a strong undertone of death and violence’ (Howland 2004 p. 43) ‘an extended confrontation with death’: even that this dialogue is ‘an extended confrontation with death’ (ibid. p. 44). As for its historical setting, the dialogue’s dramatic date is uncertain: scholars place it variously between 424 and 408 bce (Nails 1998). There is nothing to anchor it to a particular year in the way that we can confidently *Symposium* to 415 bce. Further complications include the suggestion that Book 1 was composed separately and at a different time from the rest of *Republic* (which does not preclude a common dramatic date, of course, if there was any

evidence for one). What is clear that any plausible date for the dramatic setting between 424 and 408 bce has as its background continuous wars and its horrors. On any of the possible dates the invasion of Attica and the burning of its farms by Spartan forces, followed by the deadly outbreak of plague in Athens as its people crowded for the protection of the city walls (430-429 bce), would have been a recent memory. If the dramatic dates are after 416 bce then memory would include the calamitous Sicilian Expedition.

III The return of poetry

Several other points can be added to this. First, when Socrates discusses poetry in Book 10 his objection is not to all poetry, but only to the kind that is purely imitative or mimetic. Quite what is meant by these terms is left unclear, but the exclusion would surely apply to poetry that has earlier been approved for the ideal city-state, such as Homer's line 'the Greek army moved forward, 'breathing valour, in silent obedience to their officers' (above, *Republic* 389e), while nonsense verse such as Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, which is imitative of nothing, would presumably pass the test. Socrates argues that art is inferior to the work of the craftsman who makes a real bed: the painter deceives the viewer with a representation that is one stage away from reality and two stages away from the Idea of 'chairness' which the craftsman is assumed to have at least some inkling of. The conception of art here is very crude and naive. In Picasso's 'Chair 1961' (New York Museum of Modern Art) we see a sculpture of a chair which Picasso began with a drawing on paper that he cut out and folded and passed on to a craftsman to translate into a sheet metal design. The interest is in materials and how they create possibilities, and shapes that are somehow there behind the chairs and other common objects to which we generally bring our dulled and conventional ways of seeing. The painting is not an imitation but a making of something new. The Greeks of Plato's time had around them extensive examples of such art, particularly in the form of pottery where the purpose and shape of the vessel – the broad, shallow *kylix* or drinking-cup, the *oenochoe* or wine jug – lent itself to particular designs of painting and not to others. The Brygos painter, for example, created a picture of a young man vomiting (presumably wine) while a girl holds his head (L479 in the Martin von Wagner Museum, University of Würzburg). On a tall, narrow vessel the scene would lose its impact because the two

characters could not easily be painted and seen together as the scene requires. The *kylix* on which it appears, however, enables them to stand in front of each other in a way that the broad bottom of the wide drinking-cup, emphasized by a circular meander surrounding the picture, makes possible. When red-figure vase painting replaced black-figure in the early 6th century BCE this was a result of innovations in pottery techniques that allowed more detail and more use of perspective. It allowed painters to see and paint in a new way, not to represent more accurately.

Much the same can be said of poetry. Its very name comes from the Greek word *poiēsis*, a ‘making’. When we read in Homer of Achilles ‘wandering distraught along the shore of the unharvested sea’ (*Iliad* XXIV, l. 10, Lee’s translation, marked out for censorship in *Republic* 388a) we are not reading a representation of Achilles and what he did, as if we expected the poet to give us the most accurate – most like a photograph, we might say today – representation possible: because the poem is in hexameter verse, which ‘real life’ is not, because Homeric expressions such as ‘unharvested’ sea or the well-known ‘wine-dark’ sea do not make claims about the sea which can be literally true or false, and because no line of poetry stands on its own, to be considered as offering something to be imitated or shunned in the interests of moral improvement but has its meaning rather in the whole poem of which it is a part, where it echoes other lines in the poem or carry echoes from earlier poems and writers. Poetry has to be interpreted, and a good interpretation is characterised not by truth but by other qualities: it is well-judged, comprehensive, sensitive (Desjardins 1988, esp. p. 118).

Secondly, in *Republic* 10 immediately after alluding to the ‘ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry’ we read that poetry can be admitted to the ideal city-state after all:

Let us assure our sweet friend [ie poetry] and the sister arts of imitation that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered State we shall be delighted to receive her – we are very conscious of her charms; but we may not on that account betray the truth... Shall I propose, then, that she be allowed to return from exile, but upon this condition only – that she make a defence of herself in lyrical or some other metre?... And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf: let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a

kindly spirit; for if this can be proved we shall surely be the gainers – I mean, if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight?

This passage is very inconvenient to the literal readers of Plato. Iris Murdoch for instance ignores it in her book *The Fire and the Sun*. Lee's introduction to the section from which the passage above comes reads: 'Poetry, dramatic poetry in particular, has a bad effect on its audiences, who learn to admire and imitate the faults it represents. We cannot, therefore, allow poetry in our ideal state' (Lee 1968 p. 436). There is no acknowledgement of the readmission of the poets at all.

Literal readers of *Republic* will have to accept that Plato both represented Socrates as 'banishing the poets' and as readmitting them. They are not free to pick and choose what is to be read literally and what is not. This point can be made more fundamentally. Plato has Socrates effectively say that *Republic* is not to be read literally: 'I'm not sure I'm not being slightly ridiculous at the moment ... I was forgetting that we are amusing ourselves with an imaginary sketch' (536b-c, Lee's translation). Jowett, whose translations I have used here for the most part, finds this typical of Plato, writing in his Introduction to the *Symposium* of how naturally 'does Plato mingle jest and earnest, truth and opinion in the same work'.¹¹ Those who read Plato literally seem committed to accepting Plato's own claim that what he writes is not to be taken literally. The irony for which Plato and Socrates were both renowned renders attempts at literal reading from the start.

There is a third argument for treating Plato's 'banishment of the poets' sceptically. It is that Plato himself often uses language that is less the plain, unadorned kind that we might expect to find in works of philosophy than the figurative language characteristic of poetry. The extended simile or allegory of the Cave in *Republic* 7 is a good example. The culmination of the allegory is Socrates' explanation of it, which does not descend to the prosaic in order to make things clear, as we might expect, but reaches heights of lyrical mysticism:

The prison-house [in the cave] is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and

is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed. (517b-c)

A second and remarkable example is the myth or story of Er, that concludes *Republic* (614ba-621d). Er was a warrior from Pamphylia, a region of what is now southern Turkey. Er was thought to have died on the battlefield, but as he lay on his funeral pyre he recovered consciousness and related the story of how he had visited the Underworld, the world of the afterlife, from which he had been sent back as a messenger to describe its geography and its workings. His story, coming at the very end of *Republic*, reminds us of the first words of the text, where Socrates described how he went down to the Piraeus, and clearly echoes the visit of Odysseus to the underworld in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, one of the works that Socrates had been most keen to censure earlier in the *Republic*. Socrates reminds the reader of this at the beginning the story, saying it won't be like the story Odysseus told to Alcinous (in *Odyssey* IX-XII, which includes the tale of Odysseus's own visit to the world of the dead). Er's story, as related by Socrates, is richly detailed with imagery, and though it is not set out in hexameters like Homer's epics neither is it written in everyday, plain prose or the kind of language we might expect to find in anything we would be inclined to call a philosophical text today. Almost the whole story is set in indirect speech (*oratio obliqua*), so that there is a repetitive and to my ears hypnotic reminder that all this is what Er said. Halliwell, who notes this stylistic feature (2007, p. 449), regards the myth of Er as a 'quasi-poetic piece of writing', that can be read as 'a philosophically transfigured *Odyssey*'. Socrates related how when Er's soul left his body:

He went on a journey with a great company, and ... they came to a mysterious place at which there were two openings in the earth; they were near together, and over against them were two other openings in the heaven above. In the intermediate space there were judges seated, who commanded the just, after they had given judgment on them and had bound their sentences in front of them, to ascend by the heavenly way on the right hand; and in like manner the unjust were bidden by them to descend by the lower way on the left hand; these also bore the symbols of their deeds, but fastened on their backs. He drew near, and they told him that he was to be the

messenger who would carry the report of the other world to men, and they bade him hear and see all that was to be heard and seen in that place. Then he beheld and saw on one side the souls departing at either opening of heaven and earth when sentence had been given on them; and at the two other openings other souls, some ascending out of the earth dusty and worn with travel, some descending out of heaven clean and bright. (614c-d)

At the end of his visit, Er watched as those souls who were to return to Earth for another incarnation chose their new lives. The spectacle, Er reported, was ‘sad and laughable and strange; for the choice of the souls was in most cases based on their experience of a previous life’ (620a). The soul of the singer who had once been Orpheus chose to be a swan, not wishing to be born of a woman because Orpheus had been torn apart by women, the Maenads. Agamemnon, leader of the Greek army at Troy and murdered by his wife’s lover on his return home, chose to become an eagle because, after his sufferings, he hated humankind. It fell out that the soul of Odysseus chose last of all.

Now the recollection of former toils had disenchanted him of ambition, and he went about for a considerable time in search of the life of a private man who had no cares; he had some difficulty in finding this, which was lying about and had been neglected by everybody else; and when he saw it, he said that he would have done the same had his lot been first instead of last, and that he was delighted to have it.

We remember that one of the first passages of poetry singled out for censorship was Achilles’s bitter words to Odysseus in the Underworld: that he would rather be a poor man’s slave among the living than king of all the dead that have done with life (above). Now Plato has Socrates, by way of telling the story of Er, finding no shame in taking one’s chances in the ordinary world, and expressing this in language that is powerful and moving. It was not much earlier in Book 10 that Socrates relented on the banishment of the poets, and said they could be recalled from exile as long as they could make a defence of poetry ‘in lyrical or some other metre’ or if those who loved poetry spoke in prose on her behalf. The myth of Er has sometimes been regarded as that defence, expressed in a highly literary style – in poetic prose, one might say – in what everybody knows is the first great work of philosophy in the western tradition.

IV Reading differently

Perhaps, though, we should think of Plato's dialogues as a whole, and especially *Republic*, as sites where we witness the collapse of these binaries in 'writing that would be neither philosophy nor literature', in Derrida's words from the epigram to this chapter, while we are at the same time left with the lingering thought that they must be one or the other, in whole or part. Plato, it seems, holds out to us this new and powerful way of thinking that he had learned from Socrates – philosophy or dialectic – only to snatch it back with a warning of its dangers. It is noticeable, as I have suggested above, that both *Symposium* and *Republic* start with a stop. Apollodorus, making his way up to town, is stopped by an 'unnamed companion' shouting 'Hey, wait for me!' Socrates is stopped by Polemarchus and his boys as he too, together with Glaucon, is making his way back to Athens. Both stoppings are productive, since each eventually sets in motion a famous philosophical dialogue. Yet each frustrates the reader's desire to get to the heart of the matter straightaway and calls attention to the background of *hubris*, the greedy 'arrogance of appropriation' (Frank 2018 p. 162) for which Athens was infamous. What is to stop philosophy becoming little more than another tool in the armoury of the arrogant?

It is in this light that we should understand the aporetic nature of the early dialogues in particular: the inquiries reach no distinct conclusion but simply run into the ground. The confidence that grips the eponymous characters – Euthyphro's confidence that he perfectly understands the will of the gods, Theaetetus's that an investigation of the nature of knowledge must precede with the smoothness of a geometric proof, Phaedrus's that sitting at the feet of Socrates by the river Ilissus makes him a philosopher – is a species of *hubris*. It is in this light too that we should read Socrates's explicit warnings about philosophy: for example how young men with the first taste of dialectic in their mouths are like dogs, pulling and tearing all that comes near them (*Republic* 539b).

Plato's dialogues can thus be read as recommending a proper humility about the activity of philosophy, a recommendation which naturally extends to his own writing. We should recall that he nowhere offers a clear account of the nature of philosophy. He had before him of course the example of Socrates, whose claim to be wise only in knowing how little he knew seems itself to have been construed as hubristic by the Athenian democracy that condemned

him to death. We should not underestimate how unnerving humility is to those in the grip of *hybris*.¹² Frank (2018 pp. 28-29) construes Plato's humility in terms of authority: she writes that Plato's dialogues make 'no claim to the authority of their author or any claim on the alienation of the authority of their readers... [the dialogues] regularly and repeatedly invite scrutiny of their own philosophical authority, along with that of the authority figures they put on display'.¹³ I have elsewhere preferred to make the point in terms of virtue epistemology, writing of Plato as offering a 'slow cure for knowledge' (Smith 2014), and I have developed this with a discussion of what I call the virtues of 'unknowing' (Smith 2016). While I believe Frank and I are making essentially the same point I think I have previously done insufficient justice to the historical framing: the prevalence of *hubris* that proved ruinous to Athens, a tendency, as we can see today with horrible clarity, that was hardly unique to the Athenians, either those whom Plato depicted in his dialogues or those whom he addressed as readers.¹⁴

If we are not blithely to read *Republic* and the other dialogues as philosophy – as if we understood perfectly well what philosophy is – how then should we read them? Derrida's dream of writing is also a dream of reading. No doubt we shall not cease to be haunted by what he calls 'the memory of literature and philosophy', the thought that these are stable and even exclusive categories. Plato has shown us how to read differently: to notice how a text may be undone, made other by its own framings, contradictions and ironies, and to question the idea of a text as a stable object of study, subject to univocal interpretation (Statkiewicz 2009 pp. 4-5). To re-read a text is to admit the possibility of readings different from one's previous reading or readings – even the possibility that the author has been playing tricks on the reader all along, mixing jest and earnest, perhaps, in Jowett's phrase (above, p. 00). It is tempting to say that to re-read is to practise humility. But perhaps that is among the things that are better shown than said.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹ The sources of these quotations, if they are genuine quotations, are not known.

² All quotations from Plato's *Republic* are from Jowett (1871) unless indicated otherwise.

³ All quotations from Homer's *Odyssey* are from Wilson's 2018 translation.

⁴ Lattimore's translation (1951).

⁵ There are complex issues, which I do not have space to discuss here, concerning the idea of *mimesis* as the kind of representation or imitation that does or does not pretend to supply an accurate copy of the 'original'. See Frank (2018) esp. pp. 33ff, and Halliwell (2002).

⁶ The unnamed companion had, he says, already heard about the feast from someone who was told about it by Phoenix the son of Philip, but this person's account was unclear (172b).

⁷ This account of how the story of the feast was transmitted is complex, not to say labyrinthine, in Plato's text itself, as any comparison of the published translations will confirm.

⁸ Compare Wittgenstein, who said dismissively that many of his pupils 'imitated his voice and manner; but ... he could easily distinguish those who really understood' (Drury, 1967, p. 69).

⁹ For the conventionality of the speeches see Waterfield (2008) pp. xxi-xxii.

¹⁰ Polemarchus, son of Cephalus, was also real. He was a pupil of Lysias, a teacher of rhetoric; he was executed, probably in 404 BCE, by the Thirty Tyrants, by being forced to drink hemlock. His offence seems to have been that he was, like his father, a wealthy *metic*, that is a foreigner living in a Greek city with some of the rights of citizenship.

¹¹ This passage appears in Jowett's Introduction on the internet (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1600/1600-h/1600-h.htm>) but not in the 1871 edition published by the Clarendon Press.

¹² A prominent British politician who conspicuously rejects the self-importance of his opponents has regularly been criticised along the lines that 'A man who is arrogant about his modesty is a terrible thing' (Orr 2016).

¹³ Frank quotes Ferrari (1987 p. 211): Plato wrote in such a way as to ensure 'that the "author" should not become a despotic "authority"'.

¹⁴ Caution is always necessary in drawing historical parallels. In the week in which I have been finishing this paper, however, a UK company, Carillion, which managed major construction projects and services outsourced from government such as school meals and prison maintenance and which went into insolvency in January of this year (2018), was described in a report from two parliamentary select committees as having collapsed as a result of 'recklessness, hubris and greed' (Davies 2018). Carillion's directors 'prioritised senior executive bonus payouts and share dividends even as the firm neared collapse, while treating pension payments [that is, the pensions that protected the retirement of its ordinary workers] as a "waste of money"' (ibid.).

¹⁵ I am grateful to the two anonymous referees of this paper for their criticisms and suggestions.